

Save the Children Statement

Distribution of Baby milk in Tsunami relief package is harmful for infants

Save the Children health staff who were recently undertaking an assessment in the districts of Nagiputtanum and Karaikel came across several instances of infant feeding formula being provided in general relief distributions. This is a cause for concern since distributing infant feeding formula as part of a general ration can be harmful for children if it is misused.

Widespread distribution of donations of infant formula in the past have undermined breastfeeding rates, and in situations of poor access to safe water and sanitation, breastfeeding becomes even more important in preventing infection to infants. Where water is unsafe an artificially fed child is up to 25 times more likely to die as a result of diarrhoea than a breastfed child.

If improperly prepared, infant formula can be life threatening to children. Distributing infant formula can pose a risk to public health in emergency situations where clean water and sanitation facilities are severely limited, and where it is difficult to boil water. Preparation of formula requires sterilising receptacles in boiling water, which is often impossible in an emergency situation. Other dangers associated with infant formula distribution are that it may not be prepared properly unless appropriate instructions are provided, and that it leads to the misconception that it is a more favourable feeding method than breastfeeding. Breastfeeding is always favourable to providing artificial formula.

In situations where infant formula *must* be provided to feed specific children (notably orphans, infants separated from their mothers or infants whose mothers need support relactating), certain conditions can be put in place to lessen the dangers of artificial feeding. We recommend that the following steps be taken:

- Those who cannot lactate and infants being fed by other family members must be identified.
- A safe space must be provided to formula feed.
- Formula feeding must be monitored on an individual basis.
- Open cups must be provided. Bottles should not be used as their teats are difficult to clean.
- Carers must be taught to cup-feed as an alternative to bottle-feeding.
- Locally available brands should be bought wherever possible.
- Labels must be posted in the local language and clear mixing instructions must be provided.
- All formula must be stored in a clean place.
- Trained staff should teach caregivers how to safely make up feeds.
- Bottles, teats and unusable excess supplies of infant formula should be destroyed.

Agencies should refuse donations of infant formula, but should promote an increase in the amount of the supplementary food ration for infants and children under 6

months. This may include more pulses, oil or sugar, for instance. Wherever infant formula has already been distributed to families with infants and babies, agencies should urge that it be diverted to supplement the diets of the elderly or of breastfeeding women instead.

Save the Children Emergencies Health Team

For any further information, please contact Sanjay Nirala on 9840 732590